

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 29BOSTON GLOBE
18 August 1985DAVID NYHAN

Speeches that you're never going to hear

Because the gallant exit is foreign to our public life, you rarely see an American executive do what the head of Japan Air Lines did following last week's plane crash.

Saying "I want to take responsibility," President Yasumoto Takagi declared he'll resign as soon as things get back to normal. In Japan, it's common for a boss to take the blame for a mishap, and do the honorable thing by quitting.

The American way calls for any bigwig in trouble to try to tough it out, holler for his lawyer, bellyache about the press and wait for a bigger scandal to eclipse his travail.

Britain witnessed a similar episode right after Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands, kicking off the South Atlantic War. Lord Carrington, then Foreign Secretary, manfully shouldered the blame, while the intelligence and Navy chiefs, who were equally remiss, stayed on the job.

The French phrase is noblesse oblige, meaning that duty and honor require a certain painful course of action. But we lack that tradition in our code of public conduct. When the boss gets in trouble, he hunkers down and tries to ride out the storm. Unless they have a cushy job waiting, American bigwigs exit only at gunpoint.

Because we lack the custom of honorable resignation, here are some samples of speeches you will never get to hear:

"Things started to go bad when the public heard about the assassination manual we gave some gunmen in Central America. We got caught helping to mine the harbors in Nicaragua. There were all the bombings in the Middle East. When we found out that the country was riddled with spy rings, and an FBI agent and a naval officer were caught, I just decided to chuck the whole business and let someone else have a go. I'm going back to Wall Street, where lying and deceit are nothing to get worked up about."

- CIA Director William Casey